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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: COMESA PREPARES TO HARMONIZE BIOTECH POLICY,
SOLICITS ADDITIONAL USG SUPPORT

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Secretariat intends to launch a high-level outreach program on biotechnology that is geared to COMESA heads of state as well as agriculture and trade ministers. Although the primary objective of the program is to arrive at a joint regulatory structure and policy, Secretariat officials appear to have their sights set on removing regional bans on biotechnology in order to boost agricultural productivity. With USAID/East Africa assistance, the Secretariat intends to hire an advisor on biotechnology to lobby member state governments. The Secretariat also has requested USG support, through diplomatic outreach and engagement, both at the Secretariat in Lusaka as well as in the capitals of COMESA member states.

End Summary.

¶2. (U) During a January 29 meeting, COMESA Senior Agricultural Advisor Cris Muyunda relayed to emboff that technical experts from COMESA's nineteen member states have reached agreement on the need to advance biotechnology and biosafety policy within the region. He referred to a May 2006 COMESA workshop on biotechnology and biosafety in Nairobi that was part of the USAID-supported Regional Approach to Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy (RABESA), a project jointly implemented by COMESA, the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA), the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) at the International Food Policy Research Institute, and various other partners. RABESA has achieved consensus among technical partners on the need for a harmonized biosafety framework to help individual countries draft appropriate laws and regulations that do not create inconsistent or contradictory biosafety standards.

¶3. (U) RABESA is now developing a road map, a communications strategy, and biosafety guidelines. COMESA recently named a panel of senior African experts to advise this process. The 2006 workshop communique recommended establishing a COMESA biotechnology clearing-house to provide member states with information to inform national trade policy and to provide centralized assessment of genetically modified seed. The clearing-house would increase transparency and reduce costs by sharing resources and expertise. The workshop communique also called for a food aid policy to address the transportation and distribution of food aid containing genetically modified organisms.

¶4. (SBU) According to Muyunda, there is mounting pressure within COMESA to develop a biotechnology and biosafety policy in order to keep apace with agricultural developments in other African countries that do not prohibit biotechnology. In particular, he pointed to concern from the Egyptian

private sector regarding biotechnology's role in South African agricultural growth. He said that many within COMESA are also wary of the competition they will face due to the impending commercialization of genetically modified cotton in West Africa. COMESA's biotechnology policy would result in harmonized regulations, yet allow individual member states to determine whether or not to accept products with genetically modified content.

¶ 15. (SBU) Muyunda said that despite openness to biotechnology at the working level, the Secretariat needed the "blessing" of COMESA leaders. To this effect, the Secretariat intends to launch high-level policy intervention aimed at COMESA heads of state and ministers of agriculture and trade. With USAID/East Africa's assistance, the Secretariat will recruit an advisor to open a dialogue with regional leaders. Muyunda said that the Secretariat will also direct its campaign to the Government of Tanzania, which is not a COMESA member, but which for all practical reasons needs to be part of regional biotechnology policy planning.

¶ 16. (SBU) Emboff explored ways that the USG might support the Secretariat, including outreach program possibilities using EEB biotech outreach funds (reftel). Emboff and Muyunda discussed the possibility of a biotech event on the margins of the COMESA agricultural ministers' meeting in March, featuring a USG-funded speaker. (Note: Although the venue for agricultural ministerial was originally going to be Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, Muyunda thought it likely that the Zimbabweans would be unable to host the meeting. End Note.) Muyunda suggested that a speaker from a third country, such as Brazil, Argentina, or India, could be more persuasive

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given pre-existing (and unjustified) prejudice that a U.S. speaker would be biased by U.S. commercial biotech interests.

¶ 17. (SBU) Muyunda also inquired into the possibility of supplementing the Secretariat's lobbying with low-profile USG outreach in COMESA capitals, such as visitor programs, scientific exchanges, and diplomatic engagement with host governments. Emboff suggested that Muyunda provide periodic updates on the Secretariat's progress so that Embassy Lusaka can share this information with other Embassies in the COMESA region. Emboff also recommended that Muyunda discuss the issue at the next U.S.-COMESA Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) Council meeting this spring.

¶ 18. (SBU) Comment: Although the Secretariat's explicit objective is to develop a centralized regulatory and policy framework for biotechnology and biosafety, Muyunda (and Secretary General Sindiso Ngwenya) appear keen to promote understanding of biotechnology, dispel myths, and ultimately remove barriers to trade. Ngwenya and Muyunda consider biotechnology promotion essential to the fourth pillar of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) of improving agricultural research and attaining new agricultural technologies. More importantly, they consider biotechnology as the key to regional agricultural growth and competitiveness. Given Ngwenya's access to COMESA leaders, the Secretariat may be in a position to achieve headway on an issue that is significant to COMESA's food security, agricultural development, and economic integration.

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